

Appreciation of Biopsychosocial Human Sexual Drives

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A deeper appreciation of the primordial human sex drives, and appreciating there are gender differences, can be powerful invitation to understand one's feelings as well as to reach out to better understand the other. Such appreciation serves as the foundation for couple's relationship and sexual cooperation and inoculates against sexual conflict and dysfunction as a couple. Helen Fisher, in *Why We Love* (2004) describes the three kinds of love.

LUST is sex drive, passion, "biological imperative", "urge to merge" or craving for sexual gratification to motivate individuals to seek sex. Its function: reproduction, procreation. Physiologically, lust is associated primarily with androgens (testosterone) and estrogens and related brain pathways in both sexes.

ROMANTIC LOVE is characterized by ecstasy, heightened energy, focused attention on a preferred mating partner, attraction, "limerence," infatuation, exhilaration, obsessive thinking and emotional craving for him or her. Its function: to motivate or enable individuals to select among potential partners, prefer specific features, and focus their courtship attention on genetically appropriate individuals. Physiologically, romance is associated with elevated levels of central dopamine (DA) and norepinephrine (NE) and decreased levels of central serotonin (5-HT).

ATTACHMENT involves feelings of calm and emotional union with a long-term, committed partner, yielding or surrender, security, and social comfort. Its function: to motivate individuals to sustain affiliative connections to fulfill parental duties; care-giving, and emotional bonding for infant survival. Physiologically it is associated with the neuropeptides oxytocin and vasopressin and their neural circuits. Oxytocin, produced in the pituitary and hypothalamus, is associated with stress reduction, calming and soothing (e.g., orgasm), memory, learning.

Such basic biopsychosocial sex information can help couples appreciate differences and promote working as an "intimate team." For example, research suggests that male sex drive is stimulated to a greater degree by visual stimuli (which drive up dopamine for men) and are more aroused by novel things (e.g., a smile) than the female sex drive (Ellis & Symons, 1990) (Hamann, Herman, Nolan, & Wallen (2004), while women are more sexually aroused by romantic words, images, and themes in stories and films (Ellis & Symons, 1990).

Male sex drive is more constant while the female sex drive is more periodic but more intense (Basson, 2002), and male sex drive is focused more directly on copulation while the female sex drive is embedded in a wider range of stimuli (Fisher, 1999). Both sexes express romantic love with approximately the same intensity. Both men and women are attracted to partners who are dependable, mature, kind, healthy, smart, educated, sociable, and interested in home and family (Buss, 1994). There are differences in what men and women find attractive in a mate. In the most basic dimensions, men tend to be more attracted to a partner's physical appearance – particularly signs of beauty and health. Women are more inclined to be attracted to men with success, education, and/or position (Buss, 1994)
